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background notes

Tunisia

United States Department of State
Bureau of Public Affairs

November 1990

Official Name: Republic of Tunisia

PROFILE

Geography

Area: 164,149 sq. km. (63,378 sq. mi.), about the size of Missouri. **Cities**: *Capital*—Tunis (pop. 1 million). *Other city*—Sfax (500,000). **Terrain**: Arable land in north and along central coast; south is mostly semiarid or desert. **Climate**: Hot, dry summers and mild, rainy winters.

People

Nationality: *Noun and adjective*—Tunisian(s). **Population** (1990): 8,095,000. **Annual growth rate** (1990): 2.2%. **Ethnic groups**: Arab 98%, Berber 1%, European 1%. **Religions**: Muslim 99%, Christian and Jewish less than 1%. **Languages**: Arabic (official), French. **Education**: *Years compulsory*—8. *Attendance*—more than 85%. *Literacy*—62%. **Health**: *Infant mortality rate*—40/1,000. *Life expectancy*—68 yrs. **Work force** (2,250,000): *Agriculture*—24.4%. *Industry*—34.4%. *Services*—41.2%.

Government

Type: Republic. **Constitution**: June 1, 1959. **Independence**: March 20, 1956.

Branches: *Executive*—president (chief of state and head of government). *Legislative*—unicameral 141-member Chamber of Deputies (popularly elected). *Judicial*—independent. Judges of highest court are presidentially appointed.

Subdivisions: 23 governorates.

Political parties: *Legal*—Constitutional Democratic Party (RCD), Communist Party (PCT), Movement of Social Democrats (MDS), Socialist Progressive Party (RSP), Popular Unity Party (PUP), Democratic Unionist Party (UDU), Social Progress Party (PSP). *Illegal*—Renaissance Party (Hizb An-Nahda), Popular Unity Movement (MUP), Tunisian Communist Workers' Party (POCT). Suffrage: Universal adult.

Central government budget (1990): $3.2 billion.

Defense: 12.3% of national budget.

National holiday: March 20.

Flag: Red star on a red crescent in a white circle centered on a red background.

Economy

GDP (1990): $8.7 billion (current prices). **Annual growth rate** (1989): 3.1%; (1988): 1.5%. **Per capita income** (1989): $1,253. **Avg. inflation rate** 1989: 10%.

Natural resources: Oil, phosphates, iron ore, lead, zinc.

Agriculture (16% of GDP): *Products*—olives, wheat, citrus fruits, grapes, truck crops, fish.

Industry (33.1% of GDP): *Types*—crude oil, phosphates, textiles, olive oil, food processing, construction.

Trade (1989): *Exports*—$4.2 billion: textiles, oil, phosphates, olive oil. *Tourism earnings*—$892 million. *Worker remittances*—$511 million. *Major markets*—France 25.3%, Italy 16.2%, FRG 11.1%, US 6.6%. *Imports*—$4.73 billion: raw materials, semi-finished products, energy products, consumer goods, foodstuffs. *Major suppliers*—France 26%, Italy 13%, FRG 11.6%, US 5.1%.

Official exchange rate (1990): 1 dinar=about US$1.05.

Fiscal year: Calendar year.

Membership in International Organizations

United Nations, Arab League, Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), Organization of African Unity (OAU), Arab Maghreb Union (UMA), INTELSAT.

Travel Notes

Customs and currency: Visas are not required of US tourists visiting the country for up to 4 months. Firearms are carefully controlled, but there are no unusual customs restrictions. Tunisian dinars may not be imported or exported, but foreign currency, including dollars, may be imported; departing travelers may take out the amounts they brought in and any other foreign currency certified to have been legally acquired in Tunisia.

Health: Tunisia has no particular health hazards, but tapwater is not potable in certain seasons in Tunis. Adequate medical care is available in the capital and in other major cities.

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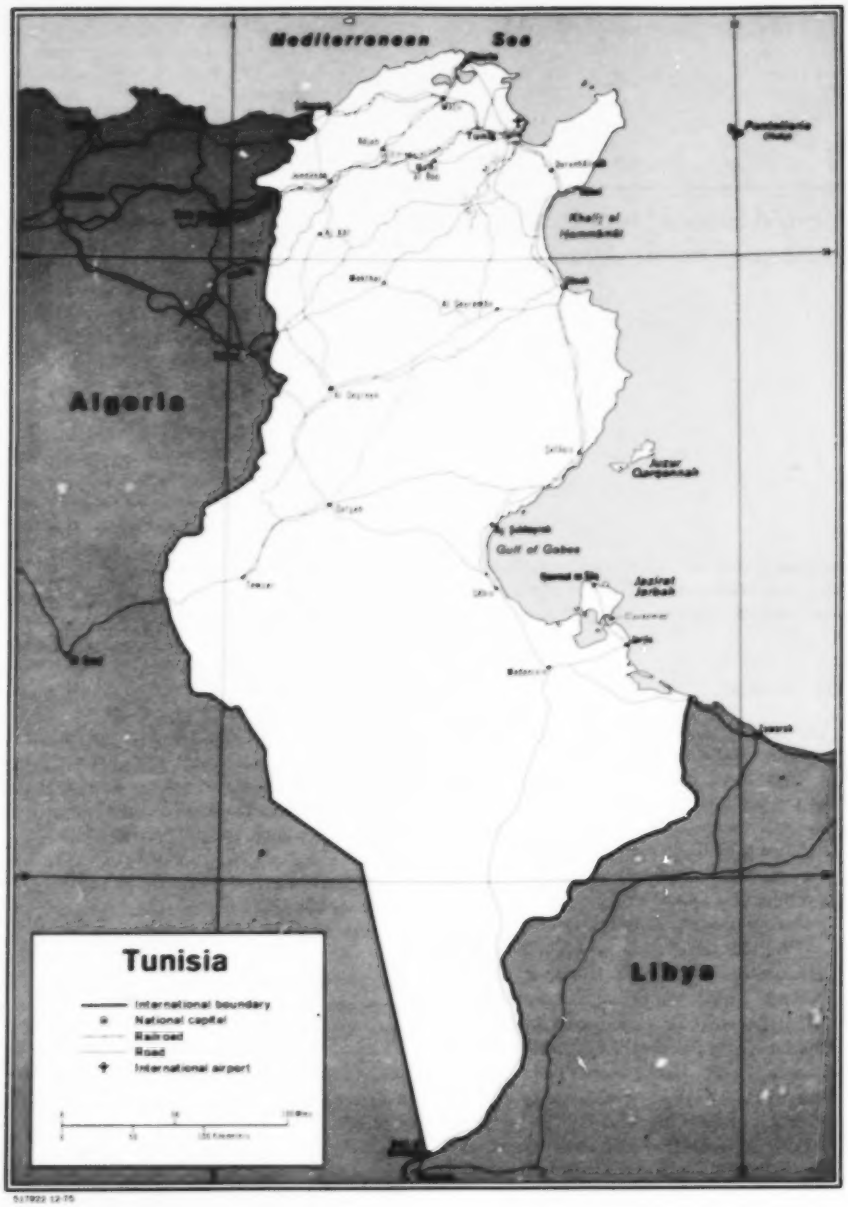

HISTORY

Tunisians are descended mainly from indigenous Berber tribes and from Arab tribes which migrated to North Africa during the seventh century AD. Recorded history in Tunisia begins with the arrival of Phoenicians, who founded Carthage and other North African settlements. Carthage was defeated by Romans (146 AD), who ruled North Africa until their defeat by tribesmen (fifth century) from Europe. In the seventh century, the Muslim conquest transformed North Africa, and Tunisia became a center of Arab culture until its assimilation in the Turkish Ottoman Empire in the 16th century.

In 1881, France established a protectorate there, only to see a rise of nationalism lead to Tunisia's independence in 1956. A leader of this movement was Habib Bourguiba, Tunisia's president from independence in 1956 until his removal by the current president, Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali, in 1987.

During the early years of independence, a series of tensions existed between France and Tunisia, which were finally resolved after France withdrew from its naval base in Bizerte in 1962. In 1964, Tunisia nationalized foreign interests, and relations with France deteriorated again. Close cooperation was reestablished in 1968. Since then, France has extended important economic credits and established many technical assistance programs in Tunisia.

GOVERNMENT AND POLITICAL CONDITIONS

The Tunisian republic was established in 1957 with Bourguiba as president. Elections followed promulgation of Tunisia's constitution in June 1959. President Bourguiba was unopposed, and legislative candidates, backed by the Neo-Destour Party and affiliated labor and professional groups, met only token opposition. In October 1964, the Neo-Destour Party was renamed the Destourian Socialist Party (PSD). In 1974, Bourguiba was named president-for-life through a constitutional amendment. Legislative elections in 1981 marked the return of legal opposition parties, but the PSD swept all seats. The ruling party demonstrated its entrenched position by again sweeping legislative elections in 1986 and 1989 and was renamed the Constitutional Democratic Party (RCD) by Ben Ali in 1988. Over time, party and state functions have fused. The RCD has no rigid ideology. Its members are expected to reflect public opinion. Internal party debate can be lively, but initiative for policy changes comes from the top.

On assuming power in 1987, President Ben Ali moved to defuse tensions which had built up during the last years of Bourguiba's reign. Ben Ali began to address some human rights issues by releasing political prisoners and abolishing special state security courts. He also started a process of democratization.

According to the constitution as amended in 1988, the president of the republic is chief of state. He is elected for a 5-year term and permitted to run for two additional terms. The president has full responsibility for determining national policy, and presidential bills have priority before the Chamber of Deputies. The president may govern by decree when the Chamber is not in session.

In the presidentially appointed cabinet, the prime minister is responsible for executive policy and succeeds the president in the case of death or disability. Tunisia's 141-member unicameral Chamber of Deputies is elected concurrently with the president and meets twice a year.

The constitution does not prohibit opposition parties, but the government has approved only six other political parties (listed in PROFILE). These parties and all other major political

forces—including Islamic fundamentalists—signed Ben Ali's 1988 National Pact, which set out secular, pluralist political rules.

Among other liberalizing gestures, Ben Ali advanced presidential and legislative elections from 1991 to 1989. He won the presidential election unopposed, and the ruling party swept all seats in the Chamber of Deputies. Candidates of the unrecognized Islamic fundamentalist Hizb An-Nahda (Renaissance Party) garnered an average of 18% of the vote in districts they contested as independents. Despite An-Nahda's apparent popularity, the government continued to deny it legal status in 1990, partly owing to grave doubts that An-Nahda truly accepts a pluralist, secular political system.

Although national elections are governed by a winner-take-all electoral code, the government introduced modified proportional representation for 1990 municipal elections. Opposition parties boycotted these elections to protest what they saw as overbearing RCD control of the process. Opposition parties also claim that the cumbersome voter registration system has disenfranchised a large portion of the electorate.

Trade unions played a key role in Tunisia's struggle for independence. Indeed, the assassination of Tunisian labor leader Ferhat Hached in 1952 was a catalyst for the final push against the French. The General Union of Tunisian Workers (UGTT) had a decisive political presence during the first two decades of the republic. In 1978, and again in 1984-85, Bourguiba cracked down on the UGTT. Arrests of UGTT leaders and ruling-party takeover of union locals left the UGTT moribund until Ben Ali's accession to power. Ben Ali encouraged a revival of the UGTT. Despite a drop in union membership from 400,000 to perhaps 250,000 as the structure of the economy changed, the UGTT resumed a prominent place in political and social affairs after its extraordinary congress in 1989.

Tunisia is a leader in the Arab world in the promotion of equal status for women under the law. Polygamy was prohibited in 1957. Tunisian women enjoy full civil and political rights. The government supports an active family-planning program.

Tunisia's judiciary is headed by the Court of Cassation, whose judges are appointed by the president.

The country is divided administratively into 23 governorates. The president appoints all governors.

Principal Government Officials

President—Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali
Prime Minister—Hamed Karoui
Ambassador to the United States—Abdelaziz Hamzaoui
Ambassador to the United Nations—Ahmed Ghezal

Tunisia maintains an embassy in the United States at 1515 Massachusetts Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20005 (tel. 202-862-1850, fax 202-862-1858).

ECONOMY

Tunisia's growth historically has depended on oil, phosphates, agriculture, worker remittances, and tourism.

The government's economic policies had limited success during the early years of independence. A drive in the 1960s for collective agriculture, led by economic chief Ahmed Ben Salah, caused much unrest. Farm production fell sharply. Ben Salah was removed by President Bourguiba in 1969.

Higher prices for phosphates and oil and growing revenues from tourism stimulated growth in the 1970s, although the emphasis on protectionism and import substitution bred inefficiencies. Tunisia continued to receive considerable amounts of aid from Europe and the United States and began to attract aid and investment from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.

In late 1985, commodity prices and tourism revenues fell. Harvests were poor. Workers' remittances fell when Libya expelled 32,000 Tunisian workers. An overvalued dinar encouraged an accumulation of foreign debt. In mid-1986 the government announced a bold structural adjustment program to liberalize prices and imports, to strengthen the private sector, and to devalue the dinar to a more reasonable level.

These measures stabilized Tunisia's terms of trade and encouraged export-driven growth. The government gained control of its foreign debt. Despite severe drought in 1988-89, the government was able to lower debt-service and debt-to-GDP ratios and to extend the average maturity of its $6.4 billion foreign debt. Structural adjustment brought additional lending from the World Bank and other Western creditors. In addition the government has continued slowly to privatize some enterprises owned directly or indirectly by the state.

Low domestic private-sector investment and high unemployment are two of Tunisia's most serious economic problems. Unemployment is aggravated by a rapidly growing work force. About 60% of the population is under the age of 25. An estimated 50% of the potential work force is unemployed or underemployed.

Another challenge is reform of the agricultural sector. The government must decide whether or how to re-privatize the inefficient state-owned farms. Mindful of the political sensitivities connected with food subsidies (severe rioting aborted the government's attempt to end bread subsidies in 1984), the government has adopted a gradual approach to reduction of the basic food subsidy. Other facets of the government's economic reform program also carry a political cost, especially given chronic unemployment. Yet Ben Ali has remained committed to market-oriented reform.

Recent oil discoveries, including one by an American oil company which will provide 20% of Tunisia's daily needs, have put off until the mid-1990s the date when Tunisia will become a net importer of energy. Discovery and exploitation of further hydrocarbon reserves remains imperative, however, especially given the uncertain timing of any joint exploitation of the Libyan-owned reserves on the continental shelf.

In the international arena, economic links are closest with the European Community (EC), which dominates Tunisia's trade, holds the largest share of Tunisia's official debt, and is home to more than 300,000 Tunisian expatriates.

The government's liberalization of some investment codes has also brought foreign capital to Tunisia. By 1990, Tunisia had attracted several hundred export-oriented joint ventures, principally with European investors wishing to take advantage of lower labor costs and preferential access to the nearby EC. In 1990 Tunisia reached a further milestone in economic liberalization when it acceded as a full contracting party to the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade.

FOREIGN RELATIONS

Under Bourguiba, Tunisia took a nonaligned stance but emphasized close relations with Europe and the United States. President Ben Ali is seeking to raise Tunisia's Arab and Islamic profile while maintaining good relations with the West.

In 1965, Bourguiba stated that the Arab world would have to come to terms with Israel. He subsequently followed the mainstream Arab position on the Arab-Israeli conflict and called for peaceful resolution of the Palestinian problem.

Partly at the request of the United States and others, Bourguiba accepted the headquarters of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) when the PLO was forced to leave Lebanon in the wake of the 1982 Israeli invasion. Tunisia has continued to speak with a moderate voice on Middle East issues despite

Israel's 1985 bombing of PLO headquarters and the 1988 assassination of PLO second-in-command Abu Jihad in Tunis.

Tunis was chosen as the site for Arab League (AL) headquarters when the AL left Cairo in 1979 after Egypt's conclusion of a peace treaty with Israel. Specialized AL agencies are scheduled to remain in Tunis when the headquarters shifts back to Cairo in November 1990.

Relations between Tunisia and its neighbors, Algeria and Libya, have been strained at times. Since the mid-1980s, relations with Algeria have stabilized. The two countries now cooperate in a number of areas, including a natural gas pipeline through Tunisia connecting Algeria to Italy. One issue requiring ongoing negotiation is management of the Mejerda River. It is the economic lifeline for northern Tunisia's fertile agricultural area, but its headwaters lie in Algeria.

Tunisia's relations with Libya have been uneven since Tunisia annulled a brief agreement to form a union in 1974. Diplomatic relations were broken in 1976 but restored in 1977. Relations turned cold again in January 1980, when several dozen Libyan-trained Tunisians attempted to seize the central Tunisian town of Gafsa to foment a general uprising.

Tunisia lost a case before the International Court of Justice when it ruled in Libya's favor in a 1982 partition of the oil-rich shared continental shelf. In 1985, Libya's expulsion of 32,000 Tunisian workers and military threats led Tunisia to sever relations again. President Ben Ali normalized relations at the end of 1987, partly in an effort to stimulate trade, the rehiring of Tunisian workers, and joint exploitation of the continental shelf.

To cement relations with its Maghreb neighbors, Tunisia has energetically promoted the five-member Arab Maghreb Union (Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Mauritania, and Libya) since its formation in 1989. At the same time, Tunisia seeks continued preferential access to the EC after creation of the single EC market at the end of 1992.

DEFENSE

Tunisia traditionally has emphasized economic development over defense spending. In 1976, Tunisia began a modest program to modernize its poorly equipped armed forces. The 1980 Gafsa incident gave a new impetus to this effort. The government has looked to the United States, France, Italy, and friendly Arab states for support. Tunisia's armed forces number about 38,000 (including 26,000 conscripts, who serve for 12 months).

The United States has given about $575 million in military aid to Tunisia since FY 1982. Tunisia has used this aid to buy a squadron of F-5 aircraft, M-60 tanks, assorted surface-to-air missiles, and for extensive military training (primarily in the United States) for officers and enlisted personnel.

US-TUNISIAN RELATIONS

The United States has maintained official representation in Tunis almost continuously since 1797. The first American treaty with Tunisia was signed in 1799. The two governments are not linked by security treaties, but relations have been close since Tunisia's independence. President Ben Ali made a state visit to the United States in May 1990.

US-Tunisian relations suffered briefly after the 1985 Israeli raid on PLO headquarters and the 1988 assassination of Abu Jihad. The Tunisian government and people resented the initial US reaction to both incidents and suspected US complicity despite official US declarations of noninvolvement. The US abstention on the UN Security Council resolution following each incident helped repair relations. More recently, the US government had expressed appreciation for the Tunisian government's facilitation of the US-PLO dialogue until its suspension in June 1990.

US security assistance has played an important role in cementing relations. The US-Tunisian Joint Military Commission meets annually to discuss Tunisia's defense modernization program and other security matters. There are no US military facilities in Tunisia.

The United States supports Tunisia's current political and market-based economic reform. The United States first provided economic and technical assistance to Tunisia under a bilateral agreement signed March 26, 1957. US military and economic aid since then has totaled to $1.4 billion, about one-third of Tunisia's foreign assistance. Direct and US government-guaranteed assistance totaled more than $125 million in FY 1990. In addition, the US government responded rapidly with natural disaster relief following severe flooding in 1982 and 1990 and a locust invasion in 1988. The US government supports Tunisia's efforts to attract US private investment through a private sector-oriented Joint Commission on Trade and Investment and the signing in 1990 of a bilateral investment treaty. Other American assistance has been provided liberally since independence by foundations, religious groups, universities, and philanthropic organizations.

The United States provides economic assistance to Tunisia through the Agency for International Development (AID), the Peace Corps, and the Department of Agriculture's commodity credit programs. Using PL 480 (Food for Peace) commodities, economic support funds, and technical assistance, AID is currently working with the Tunisian government to:

- support structural adjustment, including privatization;
- modernize agricultural marketing;
- promote exports;
- provide scholarships and technical training; and
- improve housing and health care facilities.

The Peace Corps has been active in Tunisia since 1961. The program's 84 volunteers focus on rural and urban development, vocational education, and public health.

Principal US Officials

Ambassador—Robert H. Pelletreau, Jr.
Deputy Chief of Mission—Shaun E. Donnelly
Defense Attache—Colonel Marc B. Powe USA
Director, AID Mission—George Carner
Public Affairs Officer—Richard Undeland
Agricultural Trade Officer—Abdullah A. Saleh

The US embassy in Tunisia is located at 144 Avenue de la Liberte, 1002 Tunis-Belvedere (tel. 011-216-1-782566, fax 011-216-1-789719). The US Information Service (USIS) offices are located at 14 rue Yahia Ibn Omar, 1002 Tunis-Belvedere (tel. 011-216-1-789800). ■

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